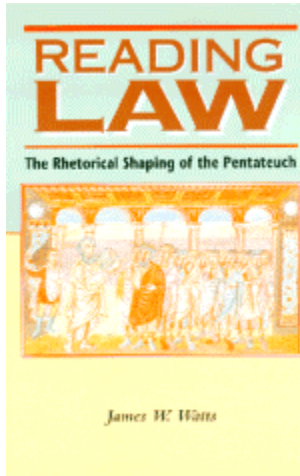


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**Watts, James W.**

***Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch***

The Biblical Seminar 59

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The baffling arrangement of literary genres in the Pentateuch has elicited no few attempts to understand its significance. This monograph by James Watts (associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Syracuse University, New York) is notable among recent applications of rhetorical methodologies to the pentateuchal legal texts. Watts, who has also written several articles on this subject, argues that the key to the puzzle is found in the ancient convention of public readings of the law, suggesting that "public reading established the literary forms of Israel's law in the monarchic period and those forms remained unchanged long after public reading had become a rarity and perhaps an anachronism" (p. 31). The primary indication of this convention's influence on the Pentateuch, in Watt's view, is the Torah's characteristic juxtaposition of narratives, lists, and divine sanctions (i.e., blessings and curses). Although the Pentateuch did not reach its final form until the Persian period, its final redactors shaped the text in conformity with conventions arising from more ancient customs. Most scholars have treated pentateuchal narratives and law in isolation, not appreciating the rhetorical effect of their union. Watts proposes to remedy these weaknesses by applying a select portion of ancient rhetorical theory to the problem.

He begins by noting that Pentateuchal law, by virtue of the narrative framework in which it appears, is apparently to be read sequentially, rather than the piecemeal approach that best suits most legal codes. In his first chapter, Watts surveys the accounts of public law readings in the times of Moses, Joshua, Josiah, and Ezra. He concludes that the biblical witness ought to be taken seriously as a testament to ancient practice, and finds

supporting evidence in similar customs in ancient Greece and medieval Iceland. Modern assumptions about speaking and reading are no reliable guide to ancient customs. Having established this foundation, he concludes that one may profitably examine the Pentateuch with a view to seeing how its present structure (on small and large scales alike) may have been shaped by the conventions of public reading. In the second chapter, he brings ancient rhetorical theory to bear on the Pentateuchal combinations of list, story, and divine sanctions. Watts notes that stories and lists are commonly combined in ancient literature, as has been demonstrated by J. D. O'Banion, who drew upon Cicero and Quintilian. A text is most persuasive when both elements are present, and there is no shortage of ancient Near Eastern examples: Hittite legal codes, commemorative inscriptions, narratives with appended lists of divine names, and the like. This persuasive combination is further buttressed when divine sanctions are also present. Watts then considers the form of pentateuchal legal codes, which he divides into three major sections: the Sinai covenant, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. In each case he finds the rhetorical pattern described above. The same pattern is also discerned in the Pentateuch as a whole: a narrative introduction (Genesis-Exodus 19) is followed by a legislative list (Exodus 20-Numbers), and sanctions (Deuteronomy).

The remainder of the book is devoted to exploring the Pentateuch's didactic and persuasive goals in light of this rhetorical principle. The third chapter explores the formal and persuasive effect of this rhetorical form on the pentateuchal instruction of its hearer or reader, with particular interest in address in the second person, motivational clauses, repetition, and variation. Of these sections, Watt's treatment of variation is perhaps the most interesting; it examines several ways of handling occasional legal contradictions, including the novel proposal of self-contradiction as a deliberate political strategy (cf. modern political practice). The nature of the speaker of law is the focus of Watt's attention in the fourth chapter, in which he studies character development in legal texts. This may seem an unlikely literary strategy in comparison with character development in narrative, but the content and form of the laws do illuminate the natures of YHWH (the primary source of law), Moses (who speaks the law in a secondary but authoritative capacity), and to a lesser degree even the narrator, in whose words everything is cast. The final chapter of the book briefly sketches the implications of Watts' rhetorical approach for understanding the historical development of the Pentateuch and its literary genre (*sui generis*). Here he argues that the social conditions necessary for the apparent compromises between P and D parties could well have occurred during the Persian period. Watts concludes the study with a brief postscript on rhetorical strategies and ethics.

This monograph is praiseworthy in many respects. It addresses a real problem in pentateuchal studies: the lack of integrated readings of these challenging texts. In dealing with the problem, Watts takes his cues for reading from details of the text itself and rhetorical theory from the ancient world, rather than a program arising from entirely outside or modern concerns. This approach helps one avoid the extremes of (a) reading

the text exclusively through the lens of a particular theory of composition, and of (b) facilely explaining away textual features that do suggest that some complicated process of transmission lies beneath the final text. Watts makes a good case for the influence of the rhetorical structure that he studies, at least at the level of the legal subsections of the Pentateuch. His judicious use of ancient rhetorical theory is also to be welcomed; he recognizes the relevance of ancient perspectives without overapplying Greco-Roman thought where it does not belong. Even though the ancient Israelites left no works on rhetorical theory, they clearly did argue in order to persuade, and therefore rhetorical theory in the classical sense is *prima facie* of some relevance. His treatment of pentateuchal stylistics and rhetoric is theoretically insightful while also remaining faithful to the text's internal features and concerns. Watts' cautiously optimistic evaluation of the historical worth of the Pentateuch and the memories preserved therein will doubtless earn the censure of those who require more historical proof than is currently available, but his historical perspective seems even-handed in my view, although further engagement with the current historiographical debate might have strengthened his case.

Despite the good quality of this study, a couple of concerns may be raised. Watts' combination of rhetorical approaches and source-critical perspectives is sometimes puzzling. Before addressing the historical background of the Pentateuch's final redaction, he correctly notes that a sympathetic, final-form reading must precede source analysis. It is not clear, however, whether the implications of his rhetorical proposals do not at least partially undercut some of the traditional source divisions. Watts does examine some of his argument's source-critical implications about the nature of P, but his approach probably has farther reaching ramifications than these. To be fair, one might well need another monograph, or a set of monographs, to deal adequately with those. The second area concerns Watts' proposal that the form of the entire Pentateuch may depend on the rhetorical structure of the story/list/sanction model. This is a suggestive idea, given the strength of Watts' case for the model's influence in lesser textual landscapes, but one would have to marshal further evidence and offer defense against counter-proposals before the case for the entire Pentateuch could be properly made.

Watts presents his arguments clearly, readably, and with refreshingly few typographical errors. A good bibliography and indices of scriptural citations, authors, and subjects make the reader's rediscovery of half-remembered fragments a relatively easy matter. This monograph is a very worthwhile study and will doubtless be consulted with profit by those interested in Hebrew style and rhetoric, especially with respect to the Law, and also by those interested in the more general subject of pentateuchal composition.